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Burlington voters to weigh in on Air Guard mission

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Burlington residents will vote Town Meeting Day on whether they want the city to try to stop the U.S. military from using the Vermont Air National Guard in the Iraq war.

Anti-war group Take Back the Air Guard has collected enough signatures to place a nonbinding resolution on the March ballot. The measure, if passed, asks the City Council to take any available steps -- including renegotiating or ending the federal government's lease of space at Burlington International Airport -- to ensure the Air Guard's mission is solely for defense, and to prevent future overseas deployments.

The group launched its petition drive last fall after no councilors agreed to sponsor a binding measure for the council's consideration. The group since has obtained about 1,700 signatures to earn the resolution a place before voters, organizer Hal Cochran said Monday during a City Hall news conference.

"The issue is the proper use of city property," Cochran said. "We're not trying to get rid of the Guard. We're just trying to get the Pentagon to give them back their traditional role as air defense."

Vermont's Air Guard is in the midst of deploying about 400 airmen -- pilots and ground crew -- to the Middle East in support of the war as part of a rotation every 18 months. Among the overseas mission is "close air support," which involves bombing runs over Iraq.

Take Back the Air Guard said its resolution could prevent similar deployments. The resolution also calls for the removal from the airport of all aircraft equipped as bombers, and "never again" to send airmen overseas "to take part in a war of aggression against another nation."

Sens. Patrick Leahy, a Democrat, and Jim Jeffords, an independent; and Rep. Bernie Sanders, also an independent, issued a joint statement that said the Air Guard and its 1,000 members should remain at the airport.

"Though we opposed the war in Iraq and believe that this administration has misled the country's foreign policy, we are steadfast in our support and appreciation for the sacrifices and the skill of the men and women of the Vermont National Guard," reads the statement.

The Guard faces the loss of up to 75 percent of its equipment and personnel if the 158th Fighter Wing were to lose its federal mission, spokeswoman 1st Lt. Veronica Saffo said.

"There's been a lot of confusion and disinformation that's been disseminated, especially from this group," Saffo said. "If we're not performing the federal mission, then the assets located at the

Burlington airport could be absorbed by another wing."

Take Back the Air Guard supporter Doug Dunbebin, a former city councilor, said Burlington could suffer financial repercussions, but opposing the Iraq conflict is paramount.

"You have to do everything and anything possible to prevent this war," he said.

Dunbebin said he was disappointed that leaders in Burlington, which he called an anti-war city, had failed to act on the group's proposal.

He then smashed an egg on his forehead, and as white and yolk dripped from his matted hair and clung to his brow, he said, "This is the face of the city of Burlington."